

# Russia

by Robert W. Orttung

*Capital:* Moscow  
*Population:* 143.8 million  
*GNI/capita, PPP:* US\$24,710

Source: World Bank *World Development Indicators*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
National Democratic Governance	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	<b>6.75</b>
Electoral Process	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	<b>6.75</b>
Civil Society	5.25	5.50	5.75	5.75	5.50	5.25	5.50	5.75	6.00	<b>6.25</b>
Independent Media	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.50	<b>6.50</b>
Local Democratic Governance	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	<b>6.25</b>
Judicial Framework and Independence	5.25	5.25	5.50	5.50	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	<b>6.25</b>
Corruption	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	<b>6.75</b>
<b>Democracy Score</b>	<b>5.86</b>	<b>5.96</b>	<b>6.11</b>	<b>6.14</b>	<b>6.18</b>	<b>6.18</b>	<b>6.21</b>	<b>6.29</b>	<b>6.46</b>	<b>6.50</b>

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. If consensus cannot be reached, Freedom House is responsible for the final ratings. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s).

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The instrumental use of violence defined Russian politics in 2015. The year began with the assassination of prominent opposition leader Boris Nemtsov on 27 February in Moscow, just a few feet from the Kremlin walls. Nemtsov's murder marked a sharp escalation in danger for those who disagree with official policy. The Russian government also relied on violence abroad, first in Ukraine and then in Syria, as a way of boosting nationalism and distracting its citizens from growing economic problems in the country. The increasingly unstable domestic situation, in which the political elite resorted to numerous undemocratic measures in order to stay in power, led to an aggressive foreign policy reflective of government propaganda.

At home, the Kremlin took particular aim at Russia's civil society organizations, placing 111 on the list of "foreign agents" and introducing a new category for "undesirable organizations," which makes it possible to ban the work of foreign or international non-profit organizations in Russia. The Russian organizations designated as "foreign agents" faced numerous political and administrative barriers that made it extremely difficult for them to continue their activities inside the country. By year's end, the Kremlin had designated the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the Open Society Foundations, and the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation as "undesirable organizations."

The Kremlin retained a tight grip on Russia's media space, feeding audiences a steady narrative depicting a country surrounded by a coalition of enemies that seek to prevent Russia's rise, and in which only the current leadership can secure the population's safety. The authorities also extended their control over the internet by blocking access to popular opposition websites, undermining open dialogue through the use of state-sponsored trolls, and demanding that international companies with users in Russia place their servers on Russian territory, where they are more vulnerable to surveillance by the Federal Security Service (FSB).

Elections still represent a threat to the Russian elite. Despite years of tightening repression, opposition actors have proven that elections can serve to mobilize popular disapproval of the status quo. Accordingly, the Kremlin goes to extraordinary lengths to manipulate Russia's electoral system and minimize the chances of unwanted surprises through a variety of ever-changing approaches. During the gubernatorial, local, and regional elections in September 2015, the Kremlin's refusal to register opposition candidates in many cases, combined with fraud, ensured the president's United Russia retained the governorship in 19 of 21 regions. While the authorities won almost every elective office in the September 2015 elections, regional and local voting results demonstrated that their support was not uniformly strong across the country.

As international courts continued to rule against abuses in the Russian legal system, notably requiring the return to shareholders of \$50 billion expropriated in the takeover of Yukos Oil in the mid-2000s, the Constitutional Court declared that Russia could selectively comply with the decisions of international courts, a decision later affirmed in legislation passed in December. These steps contravened Russia's international treaty agreements, as well as Article 15 of the Russian Constitution, which places international treaty obligations above domestic law.

Economic problems in the country caused leadership to take action against key members of the elite who had previously enjoyed skimming off lucrative state resources. The firing of Russian Railways head Vladimir Yakunin and the arrest of two governors of resource-rich regions did nothing to improve rule of law, but did free up resources they had previously monopolized, which could then be redirected to other pressing needs. The failure of the authorities to react to well-documented allegations of crime and corruption in the prosecutor general's office and the release of a prominent defense official after she was convicted of corruption signaled that impunity for the inner circle would continue. With no effective public oversight or accountability mechanisms, the Russian system remains deeply corrupt.

**Score Changes:**

- **Civil Society rating declined from 6.00 to 6.25** due to the widening crackdown on “foreign agents” and the creation of the new category “undesirable organizations.”

**As a result, Russia’s Democracy Score declined from 6.46 to 6.50.**

**Outlook for 2016:** In 2016, the government will focus its political attention on ensuring that pro-Kremlin parties dominate the September parliamentary elections. Even though the authorities have powerful tools to manipulate voting results and ensure victory, they are not always able to guarantee the outcome. The elections thus remain a focal point for opposition efforts. Risky military operations in Ukraine and Syria, highly volatile oil prices, and Western sanctions have undermined the stability of the Russian economy and will hamper the Kremlin's measures for maintaining domestic control. Growing discontent and hardship in a shrinking economy, as well as the impunity of corrupt authorities, are likely to increase pressure for the kind of far-reaching systemic reform that the authorities have refused to provide.

# MAIN REPORT

## National Democratic Governance

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
6.00	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75

- There are no politicians of independent stature to rival President Vladimir Putin. Though Prime Minister Dmitriy Medvedev nominally remains Russia's second-most important politician, he appears to have little authority. Russia's system continues to be one of personalized authority, wholly dependent on the president to function in its current form. The political system maintains the rule of the incumbent leaders at all costs, even if it means sacrificing the economic modernization of the country.<sup>1</sup> Despite the population's declining standard of living and economic difficulties, public opinion polls show that Putin remains popular, even as Russians understand their government is a "bizarre hierarchy of corrupt mafia clans," as prominent sociologist Lev Gudkov has put it.<sup>2</sup>
- Other branches of government serve as a rubber stamp for the executive, with no dissent tolerated on important issues. On June 9, the Investigative Committee launched a fraud probe into Ilya Ponomarev, the only member of the State Duma to vote against the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The Duma had already voted to strip him of his immunity, even though he had fled the country.<sup>3</sup> On September 30, the Federation Council unanimously authorized the president to deploy military force in Syria in a surprise session that took place behind closed doors.<sup>4</sup>
- The murder of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov just outside the Kremlin walls on February 27 brought political violence to a new high, marking the first time a prominent politician had been killed in Russia since Putin came to power in 2000. In late December, the authorities filed murder charges against four men and named the mastermind behind the crime, Ruslan Mukhudinov, who remained at large. Mukhudinov is a member of the Sever battalion organized by the head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov. With his 1.7 million Instagram followers and flamboyant support for the most repressive features of Putin's rule, Kadyrov is increasingly viewed as beyond Moscow's control and in competition with other elite power groupings.<sup>5</sup> President Putin's disappearance for 10 days shortly after Nemtsov's murder led to speculation that there was a struggle for his support between Kadyrov and some members of the Federal Security Service.<sup>6</sup> Nemtsov's relatives have asked that the authorities focus on Kadyrov and one of his senior lieutenants, who employed Mukhudinov as his driver.<sup>7</sup>
- The danger of engaging in opposition politics was underlined again in May when leading opposition figure Vladimir Kara-Murza was apparently poisoned while working for Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Open Russia as a regional coordinator.<sup>8</sup> Kara-Murza fell ill one day after the release of Open Russia's documentary "The Family," which detailed the corruption of Kadyrov's rule in Chechnya. While the exact cause of his poisoning remains unknown, Kara-Murza, who recovered, has pointed out that the government is ready to "use any means to preserve its power."<sup>9</sup>
- The Russian economy declined in 2015 due to low oil prices and Western and self-imposed sanctions that compounded long-ignored structural problems. Retail sales fell by 10 percent nationwide as consumption shrunk.<sup>10</sup> The government has declined to introduce the kind of extensive structural reforms needed to reduce dependence on energy exports and to produce innovative goods and services that are competitive in world markets,<sup>11</sup> and the economy is growing increasingly isolated as a result. Economic links between Russia and Ukraine continued to disintegrate in 2015, and Russia has lost significant trade with the West over its actions in Ukraine.
- While the president repeatedly denied that Russian troops were fighting in Ukraine, social media evidence and desertion trials for Russian soldiers who refused to go proved otherwise.<sup>12</sup> The report on

the war that Nemtsov had worked on, released in May after his death, claimed at least 220 Russian soldiers had died in Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> Putin finally admitted that Russian forces were operating there in his annual December press conference, while also denying that he had ever said otherwise.<sup>14</sup>

- As the economic situation deteriorates, the government has increasingly presented the country as a fortress undermined from within and besieged from without.<sup>15</sup> The Russian decision to join the war in Syria is partly explained by trying to distract the population from domestic problems through military action that validates the narrative of a Russia defiantly on its own. After Turkey shot down a Russian bomber that had crossed into Turkish airspace along the Syrian border in November, Russia added economic sanctions against Turkey, blocking the import of goods from that country and forbidding Russians to travel to Turkey's popular tourist destinations.<sup>16</sup>

## Electoral Process

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

- Although the government maintains a tight grip on power, Russia's leadership still claims to rule on the basis of popular will. Elections represent one of the few opportunities for Russian citizens to express dissent. Accordingly, Russia's top political leaders spend extraordinary resources to ensure a favorable outcome.
- In the September 13 gubernatorial, regional legislative, and local elections, the authorities' candidates won almost every single race after removing most opposition candidates from the ballot and using state resources to back favored candidates. In 19 of 21 gubernatorial elections, candidates from Putin's United Russia won in the first round, and a pro-government candidate from the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) won in the first round in Smolensk.<sup>17</sup> The only exception was in Irkutsk, where Communist Sergei Levchenko was able to push the gubernatorial election to two rounds and then prevailed in the runoff in a region where the communists traditionally have been strong.<sup>18</sup>
- Despite the fact that authorities cancelled the registration of Alexei Navalny's Progress Party in April,<sup>19</sup> several small liberal parties united under the umbrella Democratic Coalition represented by the registered party Parnas, with Navalny as the leader. Yabloko, which has traditionally refused to collaborate with other democratic parties, did not participate. The new coalition tried to compete in four regions, Magadan, Kaluga, Novosibirsk, and Kostroma, but the authorities only registered the coalition in the depressed, rural Kostroma region. The coalition had little chance of success there under any conditions, and they were registered only three weeks before the vote. Opposition candidates faced harassment from the authorities<sup>20</sup> and ultimately won just two percent of the vote in Kostroma. In Novosibirsk, the electoral commission claimed that many of the signatures the group submitted were not valid, though Navalny and his team provided considerable evidence to the contrary.<sup>21</sup>
- Overall, the elections set a new record for screening out candidates in regional parliamentary elections: 39 percent of party lists nominated were not registered (the previous record was 34 percent from 2007). The elections demonstrated that the registration system is "manipulated," creates "practically unlimited opportunities for administrative tyranny" and "is in no way connected to real electoral potential," as the civil society monitor Committee for Civic Initiatives put it. The most serious opposition candidates and parties were removed from the ballot while those with no support were easily registered. Usually the authorities claimed that opposition candidates had not collected enough valid signatures to register. The "municipal filters" thus made it possible for incumbent governors to compete against unpopular candidates. Only 18 of the 77 losing gubernatorial candidates won more than 10 percent of the vote, while 44 received less than 5 percent.<sup>22</sup>

- Elections monitor Golos documented 1,736 violations by 11 p.m. on voting night, considerably more than it had found in the regional elections of 2014 and 2013. Among the abuses were previously filled-in ballots, voters shuttled from precinct to precinct in order to vote several times in so-called carousel voting, irregularities in the process of home voting, and vote buying. In Kostroma, the authorities registered a Parzas party, whose similar name to Parnas may have tricked some voters into supporting it.<sup>23</sup>
- Although the authorities won nearly all the elections, the results varied from region to region, indicating that in some regions, such as Novosibirsk and Omsk, there was demand for alternative leadership.<sup>24</sup> In many regions, United Russia is unpopular even if the president scores much higher in the same polls.<sup>25</sup>
- The same creativity authorities applied to controlling the 2015 polls appears to already be at work leading into parliamentary elections in 2016. A number of changes have been introduced, including moving the 2016 elections up from December to September.<sup>26</sup> The move pushes the campaign period into the summer, when fewer Russians are paying attention to politics,<sup>27</sup> and holding national parliamentary elections on the same day as regional and local elections will simplify the effort that authorities have to make to retain control. Additionally, according to the new legislation, for the 2016 single-member district elections, Russia's cities will be divided into several districts with rural sectors added to the urban districts.<sup>28</sup> Putin's supporters tend to skew rural, so the new electoral boundaries will help dilute potential opposition that concentrates in Russian cities.

## Civil Society

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
5.25	5.50	5.75	5.75	5.50	5.25	5.50	5.75	6.00	6.25

- The campaign against civil society that authorities have waged since Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency intensified in 2015. By the end of the year, the Ministry of Justice had included 111 Russian organizations on its list of so-called foreign agents,<sup>29</sup> and the label had prompted a wave of closures and departures from the country.
- While being labelled a “foreign agent” does not formally close an organization, the label makes it nearly impossible for the groups to continue their work as before.<sup>30</sup> Different groups chose different strategies for dealing with the designation. Sakhalin Environment Watch (SEW), which had criticized Russia's Arctic policies, chose to return grants from foreign funders such as the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation and the Wild Salmon Center.<sup>31</sup> The environmental organization Bellona Murmansk dissolved in October, but said it planned to continue its activities under a different “bureaucratic structure.”<sup>32</sup> Yevgenia Chirikova, an environmental activist who campaigned to protect the Khimki forest, fled for Estonia in April.<sup>33</sup> She feared that the authorities would try to separate her from her children. Nadezhda Kutepova fled to France in July and shut down her organization, Planet of Hopes, which had helped victims of nuclear pollution in the closed city of Ozersk. Local media had accused her of being a spy after the organization was declared a “foreign agent.”<sup>34</sup> The Dynasty Foundation, a major funder of Russian science, ceased operations at the end of October.<sup>35</sup>
- Implementation of the law is uneven and sometimes arbitrary. Yevgeny Yasin's Liberal Mission was included on the list in May, but its designation was lifted in September. Yasin was appointed to the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights in August, which may explain why the authorities did not continue to harass him with the designation.<sup>36</sup> Some other organizations have also been removed from the list. In the case of Svetlana Gannushkina's Civic Assistance Committee, which assists refugees, the government placed it on the foreign agents list while also partially funding its activities.<sup>37</sup>

- The government further increased its pressure on civil society on May 23, when Putin signed a law granting the general prosecutor the right, in agreement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to declare a foreign firm or NGO “undesirable,” after which the group must close its offices in Russia.<sup>38</sup> “Undesirables” may also have their accounts frozen, and individuals associated with them can face administrative and criminal prosecution, leading to a multi-year prison term.<sup>39</sup> On July 29, the authorities declared the U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy (NED) an “undesirable organization.” On November 30, the Open Society Foundations and the Open Society Institute (OSI) Assistance Foundation were also added to the list.<sup>40</sup> The Federation Council published a list of 12 organizations (including Freedom House) that it recommended for such a designation on a “patriotic stop list,”<sup>41</sup> in response to which the MacArthur Foundation announced the closure of its offices in Russia.<sup>42</sup>
- Russia’s crackdown on civil society is damaging efforts to internationalize its universities and make them globally competitive. Top-performing institutions have been encouraged to hire foreign faculty to boost their prestige. However, media outlets then question why the universities would give such spots to foreigners. Vice-Rector Kendrick White was fired from Nizhny Novgorod State University in July after a documentary on state TV questioned why an American would hold such a senior position, alleging he and a business partner were trying to subvert Russian values.<sup>43</sup> He was awkwardly given a different position at the university after an outcry. In September, *Izvestiia* claimed that Jack Goldstone, an expert on revolutions, may be trying to start one in Russia.<sup>44</sup> Dynasty’s closure also hurt independent funding of academic research in Russia’s most advanced universities.<sup>45</sup>
- Academics in Russia now have to submit their papers to Federal Security Service (FSB) review before attending conferences or publishing them, according to reports from professors at Moscow State University.<sup>46</sup> The regulations appear to be vaguely defined, publicly deniable, and only selectively enforced.
- Some protests during the year showed signs of affecting public policies. Russia’s long-distance truckers scored a tentative victory on November 20 when their protests forced the government to stop fining delinquents who refused to pay a new user fee for each kilometer driven on federal roads. The Ministry of Transport said that it had drafted legislation to remove fees for those who did not pay the taxes, but the fees remained in effect at year’s end.<sup>47</sup> The company collecting the user fee is operated by the son of Arkady Rotenburg, a close Putin associate.<sup>48</sup> Some truckers continued to protest at the end of the year.
- Penalties for protests with political implications remained steep and were harshly enforced. In December, Moscow’s Basmany Court sentenced activist Ildar Dadin to three years in prison for violating a law adopted in 2014 that laid out much stiffer penalties for individuals sanctioned for illegal protest activities more than three times. The new law is seen as a signal warning citizens against engaging in protests, a particular concern for the regime as the economy worsens.<sup>49</sup> On December 22, a Moscow court sentenced Ivan Nepomnyashchii to 2.5 years in prison for participating in the protests against the reelection of Putin in May 2012 on Bolotnaya Square.<sup>50</sup> The NGO Memorial declared Nepomnyashchii one of the 49 political prisoners on its list.<sup>51</sup> On December 30, Putin signed a law that allows Russian security agents to open fire on crowds without warning if necessary.<sup>52</sup>
- In a case with disturbing implications regarding long-standing rumors of official cooperation with the radical right, a group of Russian ultranationalists including Yevgenia Khasis, Nikita Tikhonov, and Ilya Goryachev were convicted of killing 10 people, including civil rights and anti-fascist activists, between 2008 and 2010. During Goryachev’s trial, Tikhonov and Khasis claimed in court that they had held close ties to the presidential administration, specifically first Deputy Chief Vladislav Surkov.<sup>53</sup>

## Independent Media

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.50

- Russia's leadership continued to rely on propaganda to drill into the population that the country is on the right track. The authorities have imposed their narrative on Russian society by maintaining tight control over all major television networks and important publications, blocking access to popular alternative websites, and shutting down critical NGOs by branding them as "foreign agents." According to a December Levada Center poll, 85 percent of Russians use television as their primary source of news, but only 41 percent believe what they see there.<sup>54</sup>
- Enforcing the government line about Russia's military conflicts continued to be a point of special emphasis. On May 28, President Putin decreed that it was illegal to publish information about "personnel losses during war time and during the conduct of special operations during peace time."<sup>55</sup> When the Dutch Safety Board concluded in October that the missile that shot down Malaysian Airlines Flight MH-17 in July 2014 was launched from a Russian-made Buk missile system,<sup>56</sup> Russian media provided an alternative theory that sought to shift blame from Russia to Ukraine.<sup>57</sup> Through September, the state media focused on the war with Ukraine, but then abruptly turned to Syria as Russia launched a military campaign to protect the government of Bashar al-Assad.
- Citizens who spoke out against the official narrative faced harsh punishment. In September, a Tatarstan court gave a three-year prison sentence to Tatar Public Center director Rafis Kashapov for criticizing Russian actions in Ukraine online.<sup>58</sup> In December, Darya Polyudova received two years for posts on social media in Krasnodar,<sup>59</sup> while Tomsk blogger Vadim Tyumentsev received five years.<sup>60</sup> In October, shop assistant Yekaterina Vologzheninova went on trial for "inciting hatred and enmity" against the Russian state through social media postings that were critical of Russia's annexation of Crimea and fighting in eastern Ukraine. The postings were visible only to her friends.<sup>61</sup> The authorities have listed her as a supporter of terrorism.<sup>62</sup>
- The deepening political and economic crisis has taken a toll on Russia's independent media outlets. The prominent Tomsk channel TV2, already forced from the airwaves, had to close its cable broadcasting in February and remains only online.<sup>63</sup> Independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* announced the end of its print edition in March. Dozhd TV, which is now confined to the internet, faced various intrusive and threatening inspections at the end of the year.<sup>64</sup>
- Legislation adopted in 2014 forcing foreign owners of media outlets to reduce their shares below 20 percent caused changes in media ownership in 2015. After Russian Artcom Media owner Aleksandr Fedotov bought the Russian edition of *Forbes* from Germany's Axel Springer, he announced in October that the magazine would have less political content going forward and focus more on "economics and business."<sup>65</sup> Demyan Kudryavtsev, a former business partner of deceased oligarch Boris Berezovsky, bought out the Finnish Sanoma's share of *Vedomosti* and *The Moscow Times*.<sup>66</sup> Shortly after Kudryavtsev took over *The Moscow Times*, the editor of the newspaper resigned.<sup>67</sup> It now publishes online and a single weekly print edition.
- Journalist Oleg Kashin, who was badly beaten in 2010, argued in an open "Letter to the Leaders of the Russian Federation" that Pskov Governor Andrei Turchak ordered the attack on him.<sup>68</sup> The local newspaper *Pskovskaya Gubernia*, which is published by an opposition politician (see Local Democratic Governance), released information linking the governor to the beating.<sup>69</sup> However, Kashin claims that authorities refuse to arrest Turchak and put him on trial because he has close ties to Putin. On September 11, the man that Kashin claims to have hired the men who attacked him was released from pre-trial detention.<sup>70</sup>
- *Novaya Gazeta*'s Elena Milashina had to flee Chechnya after receiving threats for reporting that a 17-year-old girl was being forced to marry an older local police commander.<sup>71</sup> Milashina's colleagues Anna Politkovskaya and Natalya Estemirova were murdered in 2006 and 2009, respectively, in likely retribution for their work on Chechnya. Overall, the Glasnost Defense Foundation reported 70



physical attacks on journalists in Russia in 2015, up from 58 in 2014, according to the group's methodology.<sup>72</sup>

- On September 1, a law requiring data for Russian citizens to be stored on local servers came into effect. The purpose of the law is to give Russian authorities more tools to conduct surveillance of Russians' internet use when they are using services provided by international companies like Google, Facebook, or Twitter. Companies that do not comply can have their sites blocked by Roskomnadzor.<sup>73</sup> The actual impact of the law remains unclear, as major companies have been reluctant to comply, and Roskomnadzor was reported to be delaying implementation.<sup>74</sup> At the end of the year, Russia was blocking access to 20,725 websites, according to the independent group Roskomsvoboda.<sup>75</sup>
- Despite the pressure, media still have some ability to channel public opinion to affect policy. Reports about the arrest of Svetlana Davydova, a mother of seven, for allegedly committing treason in support of Ukraine, generated a public outcry that led to her release and the charges being dropped. She had phoned the Ukrainian embassy to warn that Russian soldiers might be heading to the eastern part of the country.<sup>76</sup>

### Local Democratic Governance

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25

- Local politics is also a venue for contestation between opposition and the authorities. On September 24, the Pskov regional legislature expelled its only opposition member Lev Shlosberg, whose newspaper *Pskovskaya Guberniya* had published information about Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine and allegations that the Pskov governor had ordered the beating of journalist Oleg Kashin (see Independent Media).<sup>77</sup> Shlosberg also said that the deputies removed him because he fought the designation of his NGO Vozrozhdenie as a foreign agent.<sup>78</sup>
- Petrozavodsk and Yekaterinburg are two cities where opposition mayors came to power in elections in 2013, spurring conflicts with city councils loyal to the center. When Petrozavodsk's United Russia-dominated city council tried to cancel direct mayoral elections in August, Mayor Galina Shirshina vetoed the measure.<sup>79</sup> The council ultimately voted to remove her from power on December 25; Shirshina said that she would appeal the move.<sup>80</sup> Yekaterinburg's city council also sought to remove Mayor Yevgeny Roizman, but the governor vetoed the effort after Roizman resisted.<sup>81</sup>
- Conditions in the North Caucasus remain unstable. An important part of the region's Islamist insurgency announced affiliation with the Islamic State (IS) in June 2015,<sup>82</sup> rising in prominence as the al Qaeda-linked Caucasus Emirate faced continued setbacks.<sup>83</sup> Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov rules his republic by imposing tight control with the support of his armed militia and a flow of generous subsidies from Moscow. The reliance on Kadyrov's personal rule, repression, arbitrariness, economic inequality, and impunity for abuses suggests that Chechnya is not as stable as it seems.<sup>84</sup> In April, he ordered his police to "shoot to kill" any Russian police operating in the republic without giving prior notice. Earlier, police from Stavropol had chased a Chechen suspected of committing a crime and killed him in Chechnya. Kadyrov had to retract the order when the Russian Investigative Committee intervened.<sup>85</sup> To keep control, Kadyrov publically intimidates individuals who criticize him and punishes the relatives of Chechens based in the West who protest his leadership.<sup>86</sup>
- In Dagestan, Moscow would like to bring the numerous informal fighting groups under the control of governor Ramazan Abdulatipov, but Kadyrov-style tactics have not proven to be effective in the republic, where the ethnic makeup of society is much more complex. The arrest and imprisonment of the once powerful Makhachkala mayor Said Amirov has not made it any easier for Moscow-allied groups to rule the region.<sup>87</sup>

- Regional governments face deep financial problems as Russia's economy shrinks. Reduced revenue only exacerbates the ongoing issue of unfunded mandates, in which the federal government seeks to unload expenses and duties onto local governments, but does not provide them with enough subsidies or taxing power to pay for their new responsibilities. In particular, collectively the current debt load of regional governments is more than 100 percent of their annual income and poses a difficult problem for the authorities.<sup>88</sup> By the end of the year, regional and local debts reached nearly 3 trillion rubles (\$46.6 billion).<sup>89</sup> The main cause of the problem are the decrees Putin made after returning to the presidency in May 2012, which greatly increased regional social responsibilities without providing additional sources of funding.

## Judicial Framework and Independence

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
5.25	5.25	5.50	5.50	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25

- In June, Belgium, France, and Austria froze Russian government accounts to force the payment of 2014's \$50 billion settlement by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague against Russia for improperly confiscating the property of the Yukos oil company in the mid-2000s. The freezing of accounts also affected the foreign property of the Russian state's propaganda arm, Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today).<sup>90</sup> The PCA ruling came just before a separate 2014 ruling from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) that awarded \$1.9 billion to shareholders.<sup>91</sup>
- These rulings may have led to the government's decision to revoke its compliance with the ECHR. On July 14 the Constitutional Court ruled that Russia could comply selectively with the court's decisions.<sup>92</sup> The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe noted that countries that have signed the European Convention on Human Rights are obliged to follow the court's rulings. Nevertheless, on December 14, Putin signed a law allowing Russia to pick and choose which international rulings it will enforce.<sup>93</sup> Critics point out that this law violates Article 15.4 of the Russian Constitution, which states that international treaties take precedence over Russian law.<sup>94</sup>
- In a separate case, ECHR found in September that Russia violated the rights of three of the individuals arrested on Bolotnaya Square during the May 2012 protests over Putin's inauguration to a third term as president. The court ruled that Russia violated their rights to a timely trial and the right to a speedy judicial review of the lawfulness of their detention.<sup>95</sup>
- The courts are often used as a tool of intimidation. The brother of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Oleg Navalny, remains in prison after being convicted of fraud at the end of 2014. Alexei received a suspended sentence in the same case, but continues his opposition and anti-corruption efforts.<sup>96</sup> Nadiya Savchenko, a Ukrainian pilot accused of killing two Russian journalists in Ukraine, is also on trial in criminal court. Russia says she entered the country as a refugee, but Savchenko and the Ukrainian government insist she was kidnapped from inside Ukraine and illegally transferred onto Russian territory, and should therefore be entitled to prisoner of war status.<sup>97</sup> On August 25, a Russian court sentenced Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov to 20 years in a prison camp for allegedly committing acts of terror in Crimea. His colleague, ecologist Alexander Kolchenko, received a 10-year sentence. The main witness recanted his testimony and claimed to have been tortured.<sup>98</sup>
- The Russian prosecutor general's office announced on June 30 that it would review the legality of a decision by the Soviet Union's State Council granting the Baltic states' independence in 1991.<sup>99</sup> The announcement raised alarm in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, although the Kremlin ultimately distanced itself from the idea.

## Corruption

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
6.00	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75

- On December 1 Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation released a video showing a web of corruption centered on Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika.<sup>100</sup> The foundation claimed that Chaika's son illegally took over a shipping company in Irkutsk and used the funds to build a luxury hotel in Greece and buy a villa in Switzerland. It also claimed that the wife of Chaika's deputy general prosecutor, Olga Lopatina, had business dealings with wives of members of the Tsapok crime group, which was responsible for the murder of 12 people, including four children, on a farm in Kushchevskaya in Krasnodar Krai in 2010. Two first-instance courts rejected Navalny's lawsuits charging Chaika with libel after the prosecutor general claimed that the US secret services and American financier William Browder were behind the film.<sup>101</sup> Putin said at his December 17 press conference that he did not want to talk about the case, although he added that did not mean it was not being examined.<sup>102</sup>
- Impunity also appeared to reign in the high-profile Oboronservis corruption case. Minister of Defense Anatoly Serdyukov was fired in November 2012 amid a scandal at the Defense Ministry-controlled Oboronservis, but returned to government work in October 2015 at the state corporation Rostec.<sup>103</sup> Serdyukov's former aide and alleged romantic interest Yevgenia Vasilyeva was sentenced to five years in prison for fraud in May, but was released on August 25 after only four months presumably behind bars (although journalists could not locate her during her time of supposed incarceration).<sup>104</sup>
- Vladimir Yakunin, among the most powerful members of Putin's inner team, resigned in August as head of Russian Railways, possibly under direct pressure from the president, who may have taken issue with Yakunin's son's use of Russian Railways resources to further his own business interests.<sup>105</sup> Though he has not been charged with a crime, Yakunin's loss of this position was important because controlling key state companies provides individuals access to considerable funds.<sup>106</sup> Yakunin and Rosneft head Igor Sechin had resisted publishing their income statements in April, and only did so in May after Putin insisted they make the declarations.<sup>107</sup>
- The governors of two regions, Komi and Sakhalin, were arrested in 2015 in what could be a signal that rampant local corruption will not be tolerated, especially as resources are needed for pressing state concerns.<sup>108</sup> In Sakhalin, the governor was accused of corruption and mismanagement, though observers speculated that his removal was more likely a reflection of a desire to gain control of the energy income that Sakhalin produces.<sup>109</sup> In Komi, the authorities charged Governor Vyacheslav Gaizer with heading an organized crime group that includes top regional officials, including the speaker of the legislature and a vice-governor. The charges came as a surprise to many Russian observers because the Komi leaders had seemingly met all the previous requirements of Russia's deeply corrupt political system: they were loyal to the Kremlin, delivered votes, and maintained stability.<sup>110</sup>

AUTHOR: ROBERT W. ORTTUNG

*Robert Orttung is the assistant director of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, the president of the Resource Security Institute, and a nonresident scholar at the Center for Security Studies of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich. He is a coeditor of the Russian Analytical Digest and managing editor of Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization.*

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